

The Lone Wolf

By LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

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SYNOPSIS.

At Troyon's, a Paris inn, the youth Marcel Troyon, afterwards to be known as Michael Lanyard, is caught stealing by Burke, an expert thief, who takes the boy with him to America and makes of him a finished crackman. After stealing the Ombre jewels and the Haysman watch in London Lanyard returns to Troyon's for the first time in many years because he thinks Roddy, a Scottish yard man, is on his trail. On arrival he finds Roddy already installed as a guest. At dinner a conversation between Comte de Morbihan, M. Bannan and Mlle. Bannan about the Lone Wolf, a celebrated crackman who works alone, puzzles and alarms him as to whether his identity is only guessed or known. To satisfy himself that Roddy is not watching him, Lanyard dresses and goes out, leaving Roddy apparently asleep and snoring in the next room, then comes back stealthily to find in his room Mlle. Bannan, who explains her presence by saying that she was asleep-walking. In his apartment near the Trocadero he finds written on the back of a twenty-pound note, part of his concealed emergency board, an invitation from The Pack to the Lone Wolf to join them. Lanyard attempts to dispose of the Ombre jewels, but finds that The Pack has forbidden the buyers to deal with him. He decides to meet The Pack. De Morbihan meets him and takes him before three masked members of The Pack. He recognized Popinot, apache, and Weathermer, English mobman, but the third, an American, is unknown to him. He refuses alliance with them.

CHAPTER X—Continued.

"What do you think?" retorted the count with asperity—"that I'm willing to stand by and let you moon around Paris at this hour of the morning, hunting for a taxicab that isn't there and running God knows what risk of being stuck up by some misbegotten Apache? But I should say not! I mean to take you home in my car though it cost me a half-hour of beauty sleep not lightly to be forfeited at my age!"

The significance that underlay the semihumorous petulance of the little man was not wasted.

"You're most amiable, M. le Comte!" Lanyard said thoughtfully, while the attendant produced his hat and coat. "But now, if you're ready, I won't delay you longer."

In another moment they were outside the clubhouse. Its doors closed behind them, while before them, waiting at the curb, was that same handsome black limousine which had brought the adventurer from l'Abbaye.

Two swift glances, right and left, showed him an empty street, destitute of hint of danger.

"One moment, monsieur!" he said, detaining the count with a touch on his sleeve. "It's only right that I should advise you. I'm armed."

"Then you're less foolhardy than one feared. If such things interest you, I don't mind admitting I carry a life-preserver of my own. But what of that? Is one eager to go shooting, at this time of night, for the sheer fun of explaining to the police that one has been attacked by Apaches? Providing one lived to explain!"

"It's as bad as that, eh?"

"Enough to make me loath to linger at your side in a lighted doorway!" Lanyard laughed in his own discomfiture.

"M. le Comte," said he, "there's a dash in you of what your American countrymen, Mysterious Smith, would call sporting blood that commands my unqualified admiration. I thank you for your offered courtesy, and beg leave to accept."

De Morbihan replied with a grunt of some too civil intonation, instructed the chauffeur "To Troyon's," and followed Lanyard into the car.

"Courtesy!" he repeated, settling himself with a shake. "That makes nothing. It's regarded my own inclinations, I'd let you go to the devil as quick as Popinot's assassins could send you there!"

"This is delightful!" Lanyard protested. "First you must see me home to save my life and then you tell me your inclinations consign me to a premature grave. Is there any explanation, possibly?"

"On your person," replied the count briefly.

"Eh?"

"You carry your reason with you, my friend—in the shape of the Ombre loot."

"Assuming that you are right—"

"You never went to the Rue du Bac, monsieur, without those jewels, and I have had you under observation ever since."

"What conceivable interest," Lanyard pursued evenly, "do you fancy you've got in the said loot?"

"Enough, at least, to render me unwilling to kiss it adieu by leaving you to the mercies of Popinot. You don't imagine I'd ever hear of it again when his Apaches had finished with you?"

"Ah! So, after all, your self-styled organization isn't founded on that reciprocal trust so essential to the success of such enterprises!"

"That will transpire. If you were wise you'd hand the stuff over to me here and now and accept what I choose to give you in return. But remember as you're the least wise of men, you will have your lesson."

"Meaning—"

"The night brings counsel—you'll have time to think things over. By tomorrow you'll be coming to find me

and give me those jewels, without reservation, in exchange for what influence I have in certain quarters."

"With your famous friend, the chief of the sureté, eh?"

"Possibly. I am known also at La Four Pointure."

"I confess I don't follow you, unless you mean to lay an information against me."

"Never that."

"It's a riddle, then?"

"For the moment only. But I will say this: it will be futile, your attempt to escape Paris; Popinot has already picketed every outlet. Your one hope resides in me; and I shall be at home to you until midnight tomorrow—today, rather."

Lanyard laughed quietly and subsided into a reverie which, undisturbed by De Morbihan, endured throughout the brief remainder of their drive; for, thanks to the smallness of the hour, the streets were practically deserted and offered no hindrance to speed, while the chauffeur was doubtless eager for his bed.

As they drew near Troyon's, however, Lanyard sat up and jealously reconnoitered both sides of the way.

"Surely you don't expect to be kept out?" the count asked dryly. "But that just shows how little you appreciate our good Popinot. He'll never offer any objection to your locking yourself up where he knows he can find you—but only to your leaving without permission!"

"Something in that, perhaps. Still, I always give myself the benefit of every doubt."

There was, indeed, no sign of ambush that he could detect in any quarter—no indication that Popinot's Apaches were skulking about. None the less, Lanyard produced his automatic and freed the safety catch before opening the door.

"A thousand thanks, my dear count!"

"For what? Doing myself a service? You make me ashamed!"

"I know," agreed Lanyard, depreciatory; "but that's the way I am—a little devil—you really can't trust me! Adieu, M. le Comte."

"Au revoir, monsieur!"

Lanyard watched the car round the corner before turning to the entrance of Troyon's, simultaneously keeping his weather eye bright. But when the motor was gone the street seemed quite deserted and as soundless as though it had been the thoroughfare of some remote village rather than an artery of the pulsing old heart of Paris.

Yet he wasn't satisfied. He even shivered a bit, perhaps because of the chill in that air of early morning possibly because a shadow of premonition had fallen athwart his soul.

Whatever its cause, he could find no excuse for the sensation, and shaking himself impatiently, pressed the button that rang a bell by the ear of the concierge, heard the latch click, thrust the door wide, and re-entered Troyon's.

He thought longingly of bed, yawned involuntarily, and, reaching his door, fumbled the key in a most unprofessional way; there were weights upon his eyelids, a heaviness in his brain.

But the key met with no resistance from the wards, and in a trice, appreciating this fact, Lanyard was wide awake again.

No question but that he had locked the room securely on leaving after his adventure with the charming somnambulist.

Had she, then, contracted the habit? Or was this only proof of what he had anticipated in the beginning—a bit of sleuthing on the part of Roddy?

He entertained little doubt as to the correctness of this latter surmise as he threw the door open and stepped into the room, his first action being to grasp the electric switch. But no light answered.

"Hello!" he exclaimed softly, remembering that the light could readily have been turned off at the bulbs.

"What's the good of that?"

In the same breath he started violently and swung about.

The door had closed behind him, swiftly but gently, eclipsing the faint light from the hall, leaving stark darkness.

His first impression was that the intruder—Roddy, or whoever it might be—had darted past him and out, pulling the door to in the act.

Before he could consciously revise this misconception he was fighting for his life.

So unexpected, so swift and sudden fell the assault that he was caught completely off guard—between the shutting of the door and an onslaught whose violence sent him reeling to the wall, the flight of time could have been measured by the flickering of an eyelash.

Two powerful arms were round his body, pinioning his hands to his sides, his feet were tripped from under him, and he was thrown with a force that fairly jarred his teeth.

For a breath he lay dazed, strug-

gling feebly; not long, but long enough to enable his antagonist to shift his hold and climb on top of his body, where he squatted, bearing down heavily with a knee on either of Lanyard's forearms two hands encircling his neck, murderous thumbs digging into his windpipe.

He revived momentarily, pulled himself together, and heaved mightily in a futile effort to unsettle the other.

The sole result of this was tightening pressure on his throat.

Then of a sudden he ceased to struggle and lay slack and passive in the other's hands.

Only an instant longer was the clutch on his throat maintained. Both hands left it quickly, one shifting to his head to turn and press it roughly, cheek to the floor. Simultaneously he was aware of the other hand fumbling about his neck, and then of a touch of metal and the sting of a needle driven into the flesh beneath his ear.

That galvanized him; he came to life again in a twinkling, animate with threefold strength and cunning. The man on his chest was thrown off as by a young earthquake, and Lanyard's right arm was no sooner free than it shot out with blind but deadly accuracy to the point of his assailant's jaw. A click of teeth was followed by a sickish grunt as the man lurched over.

And then Lanyard was scrambling to his feet, a bit giddy, perhaps, but still sufficiently master of his wits to whip his pistol out before making one further move.

CHAPTER XI.

Turn About.

Lanyard now thought of his pocket flash-lamp, and immediately its wide circle of light enveloped his antagonist.

The fellow was resting on a shoulder, legs uncouthly asprawl, quite

without movement of any perceptible sort; his face more than half turned to the floor, and masked into the bargain.

Incredulously Lanyard stirred the body with a foot, holding his weapon poised as though half expecting the form to quicken with instant and violent action; but it responded in no way.

With a nod of satisfaction he shifted the light until it marked the nearest electric bulb, which proved, in line with his inference, to have been extinguished by the socket key rather than by the wall switch while the heat of the bulb indicated that the current had been shut off only an instant before his entrance.

The light full up, he went back to the thug, knelt, and, lifting the body, turned it upon its back.

Recognition immediately rewarded this maneuver: the masked face upturned to the glare was that of the American who had made a fourth in the concert of the Pack—"Mr. Smith."

Quickly unclenching the mask, Lanyard removed it; but the countenance thus exposed told little more than he knew; he could have sworn he had never seen it before. None the less, something in its saturnine cast persistently troubled his memory with the same provoking and baffling effect that had attended their first encounter.

Already the American was struggling toward consciousness. His lips and eyelids twitched spasmodically, he shuddered, and his flexed muscles began to relax. In this process something fell from between the fingers of his right hand—something small and silver-bright that caught Lanyard's eye.

Picking it up he examined with interest a small hypodermic syringe, loaded to the full capacity, plunger drawn back—all ready for instant use.

It was the needle of this instrument that had pricked the skin of Lanyard's neck; beyond reasonable doubt it contained a soporific, if not exactly a killing dose of some narcotic drug—cocaine, at a venture.

So it appeared that this agent of the Pack had been commissioned to put the Lone Wolf to sleep for an hour or two or more—perhaps not permanently—that he might be out of the way long enough for their purposes.

Lanyard smiled grimly, fingering the hypodermic and eying the prostrate man.

"Turn about," he reflected, "is said to be fair play. Well, why not?"

With this he bent forward, dug the needle into the wrist of the American and shot the plunger home, all in a single movement so swift and deft that the drug was delivered before the pain could startle the victim from his coma.

As for that, he recovered quickly enough; but only to have his clearing senses met and dashed by the muzzle of a pistol stamping a cold ring upon his temple.

"Lie perfectly quiet, my dear Mr. Smith," Lanyard advised; "don't speak above a whisper! Give the dope a chance; it'll only want a moment—or I'm no judge and you're a careless highbinder! I'd like to know, however, if it's all the same to you—"

But the drug was taking swift effect; the look of panic which had drawn the features of the American and flickered from his eyes, with dawning appreciation of his plight was clouding, fading, blending into one of daze and stupor. The eyelids fluttered and lay still; the lips moved as if with urgent desire to speak, but were dumb; a long, convulsive sigh shook the American's body, and he

rested with the immobility of the dead, but for the slow and steady rise and fall of his bosom.

Thoughtfully Lanyard reviewed these phenomena.

"Must kick like a mule, that dope!" he reflected. "Lucky it didn't get me before I guessed what was up! If I'd suspected its strength, however, I'd have been less hasty—I could do with a little information from Mr. Mysterious Stranger here!"

In abstraction he wandered to a chair over whose back hung a light dressing gown of wine-colored silk, which, because it would pack in small compass, he was in the habit of carrying with him on his travels. Lanyard had left this thrown across the bed, and he was wondering subconsciously what use the other man had thought to make of it that he should have taken the trouble to remove it to the chair.

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But even as he laid hold of it he dropped the garment in sheer surprise to find it damp and heavy in his grasp, sodden with viscid moisture. And when, in a swift flash of intuition, he examined his fingers, he discovered thereon a faint discoloration—a reddish stain.

Then the shape of an object on the floor near his feet arrested Lanyard's questioning vision. He stared, incredulous, moved forward, bent over, and picked it up, clipping it gingerly between his fingers.

It was one of his razors—a heavy hollow-ground blade—and it was foul with blood.

With a low cry, suddenly smitten with understanding, Lanyard wheeled and stared fearfully at the door communicating with Roddy's room.

It stood ajar, an inch or so, its splintered lock accounted for by a small but extremely efficient steel jimmy which lay near the threshold.

Beyond the door—darkness—silence. Mustering all his courage, the adventurer strode determinedly into the adjoining room.

The first flash of his hand-lamp discovered to him sickening justification for his apprehensions.

After a moment he returned, shut the door, and set his back against it, as if to bar out that reeking shambles.

He was very pale, his face drawn with horror, and he was shaken with nausea.

Now he knew why his dressing gown had been requisitioned—to protect a butcher's clothing.

The plot was damnable patent—Roddy, somehow a menace to the Pack required elimination; not only had his murder been decreed, but that the blame for it should be laid at Lanyard's door. Hence the attempt to drug him that he might not escape before the police could be sent to find him there.

Lanyard could no longer doubt that De Morbihan had been left behind at the Circle of Friends of Harmony solely to detain him, afford Smith time to finish his hideous job, and set the trap for the second victim.

And the plot had succeeded despite its partial failure, despite the swift reverse chance and Lanyard's cunning had meted out to the Pack's agent.

In was his dressing gown that was saturated with Roddy's blood, just as those were his gloves, pliffed from his luggage, which had measurably protected the killer's hands, and which Lanyard had found in the next room, stripped hastily off and thrown to the floor, twin crumpled wads of blood-stained chamois skin.

He had now little choice; he must either flee Paris and rely on his wits to save him, or else seek De Morbihan and trust to his protection, to his influence in high quarters.

He must and would find another way; but his decision was frightfully hampered by lack of ready money, the few odd francs in his pocket were no store for the war chest demanded by this emergency.

True, he had the Ombre jewels; but they were not negotiable—not, at least, in Paris.

And the Haysman plans? He pondered briefly the possibilities of the Haysman plans.

In his fretting, pacing softly to and fro, at each turn he passed his dressing table, and, chancing once to observe himself in the mirror, he stopped short, thunderstruck by something he thought to detect in that counterfeit presentment of his countenance, heavy with fatigue as it was, and haggard with contemplation of this appalling contretemps.

And instantly he was back beside the American, studying narrowly the contours of that livid mask. Here, then, was that resemblance that had baffled him; and now that he saw it he could not deny that it was unfatteringly close—feature for feature the face of the murderer reproduced his face; coarsened, perhaps, but recognizably a replica of that Michael Lanyard who confronted him every morning in his shaving glass, almost the only difference residing in the scrubby black mustache that shadowed the American's upper lip.

After all, nothing wonderful in this; Lanyard's type was not uncommon; he would never have thought himself a distinguished figure.

Before rising he turned out the pockets of this casual double. But this profited him little—quite evidently the assassin had dressed for action with forethought to evade recognition in event of accident.

With this harvest of nothing for his pains Lanyard turned again to the washstand and his shaving kit, mixed a stiff lather, stropped another razor to the finest edge he could manage, fetched a pair of keen scissors from his dressing case, and went back to the murderer.

He worked rapidly, at a high pitch of excitement—as much through sheer desperation as through any appeal inherent in his scheme, either to his

common sense or to his romantic bent. In two minutes he had stripped the mustache clean away from that stupid, flaccid mask.

Unquestionably the resemblance was now most striking; the American would readily pass for Michael Lanyard.

This much accomplished, he pursued his preparations in feverish haste. In spite of this, he overlooked no detail. In less than twenty minutes he had exchanged clothing with the American down to shirts, collars and neckties; had packed in his own pockets the several articles taken from the other, together with the jointed jimmy and a few of his personal effects, and was ready to bid adieu to himself, to that Michael Lanyard whom Paris knew.

The insistent masquerader on the floor had called himself "Goodenough Smith;" he must serve now as "Goodenough" Lanyard, at least for the Lone Wolf's purposes; the police, at all events, would accept him as such.

Extinguishing the lights, he stepped quickly to a window and from one edge of its shade looked down into the street.

He was in time to see a stunted human silhouette detach itself from the shadow of a doorway on the opposite walk, move to the curb and wave an arm—evidently signaling another sentinel on a farther corner and out of Lanyard's range of vision.

Herein was additional proof, if any lacked, that De Morbihan had not exaggerated the disposition of Popinot.

He nodded grimly, moved back from the window, and used the flash-lamp to light him to the door.

CHAPTER XII.

Flight.

That wistful shadow of his memories, that cowering Marcel of yesterday, in acute terror of the heavy hand of Mme. Troyon, had never stolen down that corridor more quietly; yet Lanyard had taken not five paces from his door when that other, at the far end of the corridor, opened, and Lucia Bannan stepped out.

He halted and shut his teeth upon an involuntary oath—truly it seemed as though this run of the devil's own luck would never end!

Astonishment measurably modified his exasperation. What had roused the girl out of bed and dressed her for the street at that unholly hour? And why her terror at sight of him?

For that the encounter was no more welcome to her than to him was as patent as the fact that she was prepared to leave the hotel forthwith. A businesslike Burberry rainproof enveloped her from throat to the hem of a short walking skirt of rough tweed, beneath which boots both stout and brown were visible.

At sight of him she paused with a nervous start and instinctively stepped back, groping blindly for the knob of her bedchamber door, while the eyes that held to his with an effect of frightened fascination seemed momentarily to grow larger and darker in her face of abnormal pallor.

But these were illegible evidences, and Lanyard ignored them, intent on securing her attention and silence before she could speak and so, perhaps, betray him and ruin inconspicuously that grim alibi he had prepared with such elaborate pains. He moved toward her swiftly, with long, silent strides, a lifted hand enjoining rather than begging her silence and attention. As he drew nearer he was aware that a curious change was coloring the complexion of her temper. She passed quickly from dread to something oddly like relief, from repulsion to something strangely like welcome, and dropping the hand that had sought the doorknob, she, in turn, moved quietly to meet him.

He was grateful for this consideration, for this tacit indulgence of the wish he had as yet to voice, and drew a little hope and comfort from it in an emergency which had surprised him without resource other than to throw himself upon her mercy. And as soon as he could make himself heard in the clear yet concentrated whisper that was a trick of his trade, he addressed her in a manner at once peremptory and apologetic:

"If you please, Miss Bannan—not a word, not a whisper!"

She paused and nodded, eyes steadfast to his, questioning but compliant.

Doubtfully, wondering that she didn't show more wonder, he went on in the spirit of one committed to a forlorn hope:

"It's vitally essential that I leave this hotel without it becoming known. If I might count on you to say nothing—"

She gave him pause with a small gesture. "But how?" she breathed in the least of whispers. "The concierge—"

"Leave that to me—I know another way. I need only a chance—"

"Then you must take me with you!" "Eh?" he stammered, dashed.

(TO BE CONTINUED)



"You Must Take Me With You."

without movement of any perceptible sort; his face more than half turned to the floor, and masked into the bargain.

Incredulously Lanyard stirred the body with a foot, holding his weapon poised as though half expecting the form to quicken with instant and violent action; but it responded in no way.

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